MICHAEL WIGGLESWORTH AND THE SCOPE OF PURITAN PSYCHOMACHIA

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Abstract: *The present article attempts to portray a rather bleak personality of Puritan New England, Minister Michael Wigglesworth, who had in his time great influence on his community ipso facto. Mr. Doomsday, as he was called, kept a diary that reveals the abyss that a Puritan soul could fall into while struggling for perfection, which was unbreakable communion with God.*

Keywords: *doomsday, providence, psychomachia, redemption, sin.*

1. Introduction

Puritan diaries differ from autobiographies and biographies by being only of personal use (sometimes for the use of the diarist's children) and not intended for publication, an aspect which accounts for their authenticity. The reader may thus paradoxically have an objective image of the Puritan soul by observing exactly the subjective in its most intimate workings. As in the case of captivity narratives and the poetry of Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, the puritan diary that we are going to dwell upon was not intended for the public. The inner duration and its relation to the outward flowing of events invite the reader, after the discovery and publishing of the diaries, to delve into the workings of the paradoxical Puritan mind and identify the “naked” human mechanism that stood behind the impressive community of the hottest branch of Protestantism.

Ceaseless introspection, resulted from the conviction that all spiritual progress was centred on the individual, places the diaries in a perpetual state of becoming. In this respect, we may argue that Puritan diaries are the forefathers of the psychological novels; the enemy is from within the individual, the danger is not to be found necessarily outside the troubled self.

In approaching the diaristic writings of some notable Puritan figures, one should keep in mind the distinction made by Lawrence Rosenwald (1986:325-341), namely that between the almanac diary and the diary of spiritual experience, between time viewed as *chronos* and time recorded as *kairos*. Whereas the first type of diary contained daily entries consisting of events, aspects related to weather and the like, the second variant, an account of someone's own acts and feelings, was appealed to in order to work out dilemmas, supervise one's spiritual progress and thus discover signs announcing his/her place among the elect. The practice of writing such a diary as the latter could show the author's fault or/and virtues, aspects to be improved or maintained and, hand in hand with this, it unveiled subtle or obvious links between daily events and acts, and God's plan. It was, in other words, with its detailed depiction of life, an appropriate instrument for measuring one's process of regeneration. All in all, the Puritan diary offered an

escape from the tension of inner conflict; it was, in Kenneth B. Murdock's (1949:102) words an "outlet for doubts and fears", assuring purgation and relief from the perpetual sense of despair. Its role as a mirror for the self helped the diarist explain doctrine in terms of individual life and concrete personal facts and thus integrate and understand it.

The approach of time as *kairos* in Puritan diaries will be made in this paper by highlighting the details offered by Michael Wigglesworth's diary, a document that, together with his famous poem, "Day of Doom", justify his nickname: "Mr. Doomsday".

2. Wigglesworth's Bleak View

Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705) was born in England and moved with his family in New England in 1638. He graduated from Harvard in 1651 and was a tutor there for three years. In 1656, Wigglesworth was appointed minister for the parish in Malden, Massachusetts where he took care of both the spiritual and physical health (he also studied medicine) of his parishioners. Michael Wigglesworth sees through Manichean lenses. As a poet, he reveals a dark, bleak, pessimistic mood and the personal duration (as recorded in his diary) is burdened with eternal doubt. The temporal flow is eschatologically oriented towards the Second Coming. In depicting the moment of transcending the temporal and spatial dimensions, Wigglesworth emphasizes the frightening aspects bringing to the foreground the idea of sinfulness, judgment, damnation, and punishment. His *The Day of Doom, or a Poetical Description of the Great and Last Judgment; with a Short Discourse about eternity*, written in ballad meter is, in Alan Shucard's (1988:24-25) words, "an epic hellfire sermon" and "a summary of American Puritanism". Considered of an "ominous rigidity", almost pure doggerel, by the same critic, the poem was though "the most popular poem ever written in America" (Matthiessen 1928:492). Its didactic tone, with effective mnemonic measure, and the depiction of theological concepts essential to the Puritan devotee made it in fact the first American bestseller (1,800 copies printed and sold within a year – 1662) and earned its author the already mentioned nickname: "Mr. Doomsday".

"Psychomachia" (the term comes from the homonymous title of a poem by the Latin poet Prudentius), which describes the conflict between vices and virtues concluding with the defeat of paganism by Christian faith, is employed here not in order to highlight a pathologic tendency but rather to indicate the main reason for writing a diary as existential necessity – a conflict of the soul caused by the never-ending Puritan dilemma: "Am I damned or am I of the elect?". The struggle of one's soul against one's own weakness and drawbacks threatening with backsliding and estrangement from God is most accurately and also gloomily described in Michael Wigglesworth's *Diary*. It is an extreme example of how a Puritan understood to analyze his own life and it is excessively bleak. There is hardly a glimpse of the much longed for heavenly joys. In the "Introduction" to the twentieth-century edition of Wigglesworth's diary, Edmund S. Morgan writes:

His diary is even more challenging than his verse to any liberal view of the Puritans. For the man that emerges here calls to mind those stern figures in steeple-crowned hats who represent Puritanism in popular cartoons. So closely does Michael Wigglesworth approximate the unhappy popular conception of our seventeenth-century forbears that he seems more plausible as a satirical reconstruction than he does as a human being. (Morgan 1965:V)

From this point of view, minister Wigglesworth's writing does not portray the genuine Puritan, but an exception. We may add that "Mr. Doomsday" is an incomplete (crippled being too harsh a word) Puritan as the diary presents him, i.e. he absorbed completely only one of the Puritan

tenets: innate depravity. That is why the content of the diary uncovers a “morbid, humorless, selfish busybody”, an “ugly”, “absurd”, “pathetic” cartoon caricature of a Puritan (Morgan 1965:VII). Kenneth B. Murdock (1949:105) has a milder opinion, as he affirms that Wigglesworth’s unbearable morbidity “could be viewed as only the result of a hard working idealist”.

Like most of the Puritans of his time, Michael Wigglesworth paid much attention to how he spent his time. As a professor at Harvard, a trained Greek and Latin scholar, the minister seems to be in perpetual conflict regarding the amount of time dedicated to his studies. It is rather puzzling because Puritans viewed acquiring knowledge as a way to get closer to God. Something that he at one point calls “ocean of deadly poison in my heart” (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:32) makes him unable to “prevail against that cursed frame to think long the time I spend in reading gods word” (1965:37). Even if “willing solemnly to spend time seeking Lord” (1965:35), Wigglesworth’s spiritual yearnings are sabotaged, in his view, by his love for study and his students. There is a continuous struggle between his tendencies of either filling time with godly thoughts and acts or spending it by concentrating on his academic work. The states of mind he goes through range from paradoxical relief (“God caused me to taste Emptiness in my studies and to make my soul desire himself” (1965:42)) to almost numbness (“I was quite puzzled this day and the greatest part of it could do just nothing” (1965:56); being puzzled was a frequent, though not openly acknowledged, condition for the Puritans who were always trying to relate daily events with God’s will). The day is punctuated by these changes as the following entries show:

I found god in the forenoon mightly affecting my heart in publick prayer...After noon god pleased to give some affection. (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:7)
 This morning god let me in some comfortable perswasion of his love to me. (1965:8)
 On Thursday morning the Lord was pleas’d to give me somewhat a heart-breaking meditation of him. (1965:13)
 I was somewhat dejected with se feares in the forenoon. (1965:15)
 I found many vain things in the former part of the day and much dead-heartedness before noon. But afternoon god in some measure helping me to hear himself speak things that concerned me. (1965:41)

Many moments of the day, especially mornings, are dominated by fear. Wigglesworth is consumed by a never ending deep-seated angst in the most Kierkegaardian fashion: “my soul was exceedingly afraid and brought to the dust before god” (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:16). He is seized by it at day break and struggles with it through the day, the passing of time being not the common flow but a sequence of decisive moments regarding his own redemption. The tension which builds up leads to hair-splitting, psychomachian self analysis time and again. Always, in the background, analytical thoughts unreel, never changed, linked to or determined by exterior events, but not quite belonging to the common temporal sequence. Inside, there is a continuous tormented present painfully reflecting on sinful past and frightened by what future prepares. This oscillation of spiritual dispositions may be depicted as a series of inner developments delimited by Sabbaths expected by Wigglesworth as “blessed seasons wherein poor wandering harlots return to their husbands again” (1965:82). The Lord’s Day seems to be a spiritual shore, as he felt God preached for him on such a day. It is a temporal parenthesis, a break from the inner workings tearing Wigglesworth’s soul apart.

“My fear is lest my will should blind reason” (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:70), the Puritan divine confesses in an entry on March 12th, 1655. To this, he adds “a spirit of impenitent security” (1965:43), which could be translated into a “taking God for granted”

attitude, and an excessive love for the creature. The diary unveils a mind inclined towards daring speculations and doubts which are dangerous for a soul heavily marked by fear. That is why sometimes he sees himself as a Jakob-like figure and records: “I set myself again this day to wrestle with the Lord for my self and then for my pupils” (1965:27), and “God helpt me to wrestle with him” (1965:40). At other times, he is surprisingly assertive regarding individual response to theological doctrine: “I desire universal holiness... such a Christ pleaseth me best as will make me holly” (1965:78). The universal holiness wished by Wigglesworth reminds of Origen’s conception of “apokatastasis”, the redemption of all creatures including devils, which has always been regarded as heretical by Christian denominations. This adds to his anguish, but he oscillates here, too. He struggles to value his time on earth not by studying and teaching his beloved students as his will is inclined to, but by being faithful to God in a very restricted and restrictive manner, somewhere from beyond the time and place he lives in. He is convinced though that he is condemned to a consuming – because of the insecure “in-between” – condition. “I am unfit for heaven because unfit for earth” (1965:61), Wigglesworth concludes in his diary notes. Realizing that escaping his given time and place is not possible for a weak and backsliding man as he sees himself, Wigglesworth accepts his condition but begs to be assisted in his “walk with god in the world among a perverse generation” (1965:38).

The relationship with the world is as troubled as the one with God. The attitude is again wavering. At one point he is “ready to be desiring and hoping for a paradise in this world, Lord pardon it” (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:81) and then he prays for “weaned affections” from the world and shares his willingness to die. Still, the emphasis is on the negative implications of a love too ardent for the creature, mentioned in many of the entries:

when creatures smile god is undervalew’d (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:7)

I feel no power to love and prize god in my heart, my spirit is so leavened with love to the creature (1965:9)

cares I had for the good of others...stoln my heart from god (1965:11)

I find so much of my spirit goe out unto the creature, unto mirth, that there is little savour of god left in my soul. (1965:12)

I find again *whorish* desertations of my heart from God to the creature. (1965:17)

Michael Wigglesworth’s faith seems to be moulded on a literal grasp of the Protestant principle *sola fide*. Any act directed towards the creatures is a waste of time. He experiences an inner split: it is either one or the other, it is either here, this world, or beyond, in the next world; there is no reconciliation between the two. “I have hopes of doing or obtaining good...so that it is very hard for me to set my heart upon god himself and not to rest in the creature” (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:6). Perhaps that is why he hopes for a fusion between “doing”, pertaining to the Puritan concept of the “calling”, and the afterlife. “I cannot desire heaven” he explains in an entry on November 9, 1655, “because ‘tis a place where I shall see and wonder at and acknowledge the glory of god forever; But I rather desire a heaven where I might be doing for god than onely thinking and gazing on his excellency” (1965:53).

As regards one’s temporal limitations of the personal history on earth, both death and birth spur Wigglesworth to meditate on sinfulness and God’s anger. The death of some members of the church in Cambridge, recorded through the use of a dynamic image – “Gods visiting hand has now pluckt away 4 from us” (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:56) – leads the Harvard professor to meditate on God’s wrath and his sins, which have driven God away from the society and the place where he lived. Writing about the birth of his first child he dwells much on his own fatigue and discomfort, while his wife’s pains are occasion for meditation on sin and death. Wigglesworth follows the traditional Puritan manner of establishing correspondence

between the created world and the events in it on the one hand, and deep religious significance on the other. Striking is though the fact that he draws a parallel between the mother's bitter "dolours of child-bearing" and "the pangs of eternal death" (1965:96), while the event of giving birth is rather connected to redemption in Christian thought. Michael Wigglesworth the son, like Michael Wigglesworth the father, has a strange attitude. Pondering on his father's death, he recurrently bemoans the lack of real sorrow without explaining it in the traditional way by the hope that he is in a "better place". His drama is being at odds with his own rebellious feelings.

Life is for Michael Wigglesworth a pilgrimage through the wilderness of sin, a wilderness that was also literal for a New Englander. "Lord take not thy good spirit from me", he prays, "which is my onely joy in the house of my pilgrimage" (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:23). This pilgrimage is guided by the providential hand of God: "Thou hast redeemed me, led me through a howling wilderness to humble me and there spoken to my heart" (1965:63). According to Puritan teaching, while on earth, man has to follow his calling and do the best of it. Each human being must observe this requirement as religious duty and fulfil it on an individual level, while God assists human history on a communal level: "Mind my work which is all duty; and let god alone with events which is his work" (1965:83). Individual history is not autonomous, of course; it is dependent on God's will and providential interference. One's calling cannot be activated unless placed under God's guidance: "I cast myself upon gods providence to see what he will do for me and by me." (1965:95) God's presence in human history on all levels means harmony as well as chaos, according to the way in which men understand to fulfil their part in the covenant both as community and as individuals. That is why Wigglesworth establishes a link between his personal history and that of the community he is a member of, by reading external events as consequences of individual sins: "no marvail, though he bast my endeavours and make the college and country about me fare the worse for my sake though he punish my bareness with publick drought" (1965:29). He also records that the way in which the community as a whole and each member by him/herself may try to make amends is by sanctifying time and investing it with healing properties in establishing days of public and private humiliation, and fast days for times of trial. "Thus god seals his word with dreadful works" (1965:30) – providential history is remarkable as well as strange for the human mind, but the Puritans internalized the paradox and lived accordingly.

Wigglesworth does not mention keeping such individual private days as Cotton Mather does for instance, but records moments of setting time apart to analyze his life. In one of the entries, as part of the preparation before Lord's Supper, Michael Wigglesworth draws bitter conclusions regarding his relationship with the creature and with God's providence. We will quote the list almost entirely because it is highly suggestive of the sense of inner depravity that the diarist was struggling with and it also shows the structured, detailed manner, or better said strategy, in which a Puritan understood to confront his soul:

Upon examination before the Lord supper I find:
 A loose and common heart that loveth vanity and frothyness
 A prophane heart appearing in distracting thoughts in holy dutys, weariness of them through slouth and carnality
 A proud heart.
 An unbelieving heart which questions gods love, which cannot wait his time, which cannot trust his providence without distracting cares (...)
 A hard heart that cannot be so deeply affected with my sins (...) as with my outward troubles
 A sensual heart that sometimes can see no glory in heavenly things
 An unthankful heart
 A heart full of spiritual whoaredoms (...) (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:76-77)

Such conclusions, drawn after thorough introspection, make him afraid of his own heart and he thus confesses to be “above measure vile” (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 1965:20), “going awwhoaring loosing my first love” (1965:14). The tone of his bitter outpourings get Davidian nuances – “pity for I am oppressed by thy foes” (1965:23) – and give way to other cries reminiscent of the *Old Testament*: “Is there no balm in Gilead for these plague sores?” (1965:42), a reference to Jeremiah 8:22: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored?” (*The Geneva Bible* 1969) The Puritan typological view on history subtly comes in to create the link to the mythical time so that the present struggle has more substance and meaning as part of a God-determined cyclicity.

Towards the end of the diary, Wigglesworth makes a “bad/good” list in which he finds answers to worries regarding the approaching winter. This seems to be the season that he, and maybe also his friends and neighbours, feared most because of the sharp cold and heavy snows. New England’s nature continually challenges its Puritan inhabitants and even more a man with hypochondriac tendencies as Michael Wigglesworth was. But we are on Puritan territory where religious vision transfigures everything that seems harmful at first glance. This is what the Harvard professor does by counterbalancing each trouble brought forth by winter with a thought on God’s plan and the usefulness of everything that He sends unto people. The conclusion is that he has thanks to give because even if seemingly in distress, he is under God’s protection. For this, he turns again to the *Old Testament* and decides to erect a pillar “in Memoriall of his former mercys received in answer to prayer.” (1965:93) This monument, not only mentioned but also drawn in the diary, is a replica of the one erected by Samuel, called Eben-Ezer and accompanied by an inscription indicating God’s help. This shows once again the Puritan awareness of the fact of belonging to the chosen people of a New Israel.

3. Concluding Remarks

Michael Wigglesworth wrote less a diary than a collection of observations regarding his spiritual state. The emphasis falls not on the hope in a future redemption, but on his failure as a Christian. Meticulous, introspective and apprehensive, Wigglesworth does a remorseless self-analysis. The reader almost does not get any sense of time passing, of anything changing. The whole diary consists of cycles of sin–prayer–(sometimes) godly alleviation–backsliding, after which the sequence starts again. It is a close circuit managed as it were by a mind prisoner to its own workings.

Psychomachia, a continuous, arduous struggle for the soul, seems to go as a red thread through the history of American literature. An overall look into the American mind would discover that the Puritan legacy may be traced today in the American people’s belief in the need for moral justification for private, public, and governmental acts as well as in the necessity and possibility of reaching perfection, a perfection that Michael Wigglesworth looked for his entire life.

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